

A Life in Colour

At his recent retrospective in the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery, most of Pat Scott's paintings were on show, but only a few of his tapestries were exhibited. PETER LAMB redresses the balance.

Patrick Scott (b. 1921) has had two complementary careers as an artist: he is most famous for his exquisitely simple abstracts in gold and white on unprimed canvas, yet, as a designer of tapestries, he revels in all the colours of the rainbow. At the recent retrospective in Dublin, all of his important paintings were on show but only a few of the tapestries were exhibited. This article will attempt to redress the balance.

Patrick Scott was born near Kilbrittain in county Cork in 1921 where he grew up on the

family farm overlooking the sea. He worked as an architect for Michael Scott in Dublin from 1945 to 1960, at which time he became a full-time artist. His paintings first received international attention when he represented Ireland at the Venice Biennale in 1960. As an architect and designer, he worked on *Bușaras* (1952) where he created mosaic mural decorations which prefigured his future interest in tapestry. His earliest textile designs were for printed linens which were commissioned by John Maguire for Brown Thomas in Dublin and he designed carpets for a county Cork manufacturer. His first tapestry (1963) was for the Intercontinental Hotel in Cork (now Jury's Hotel) and was made by V'Soske Joyce, a producer of hand-tufted carpets in county Galway. He has continued to collaborate with V'Soske Joyce for nearly

forty years and has produced about fifty tapestries with them. In addition, he has designed nine woven tapestries for the Aubusson workshops of Tabard Frères et Soeurs in France and ten in Mexico for the village weavers of Oaxaca. This large output includes many important pieces, at least one of which, *Blaze*, 1972 (Fig 1) is a great masterpiece.

Scott's work can be seen as part of the tapestry renaissance brought about in France in the 1930s and 1940s by the artist, Jean Lurçat, and the weaver, Francois Tabard, who worked together at Aubusson. Scott himself worked with Francois Tabard from 1966 to 1979. Lurçat and Tabard returned tapestry to a two-dimensional art-form, using designs based firmly on a knowledge of weaving technique. The number of colours used was reduced to approximately fifty and numbered cartoons, relating to dyed yarns selected by the artists, replaced the oil paintings used in previous centuries which required up to 30,000 colours to complete. The 'new tapestry' became known through exhibitions in the 1940s, such as a Lurcat show in Dublin that was seen by Patrick Scott. The rise of modern architecture, with its clean lines and uncluttered surfaces, created a need for tapestry and Scott's former architectural colleagues, Robin Walker and Ronald Tallon, were early and consistent patrons.



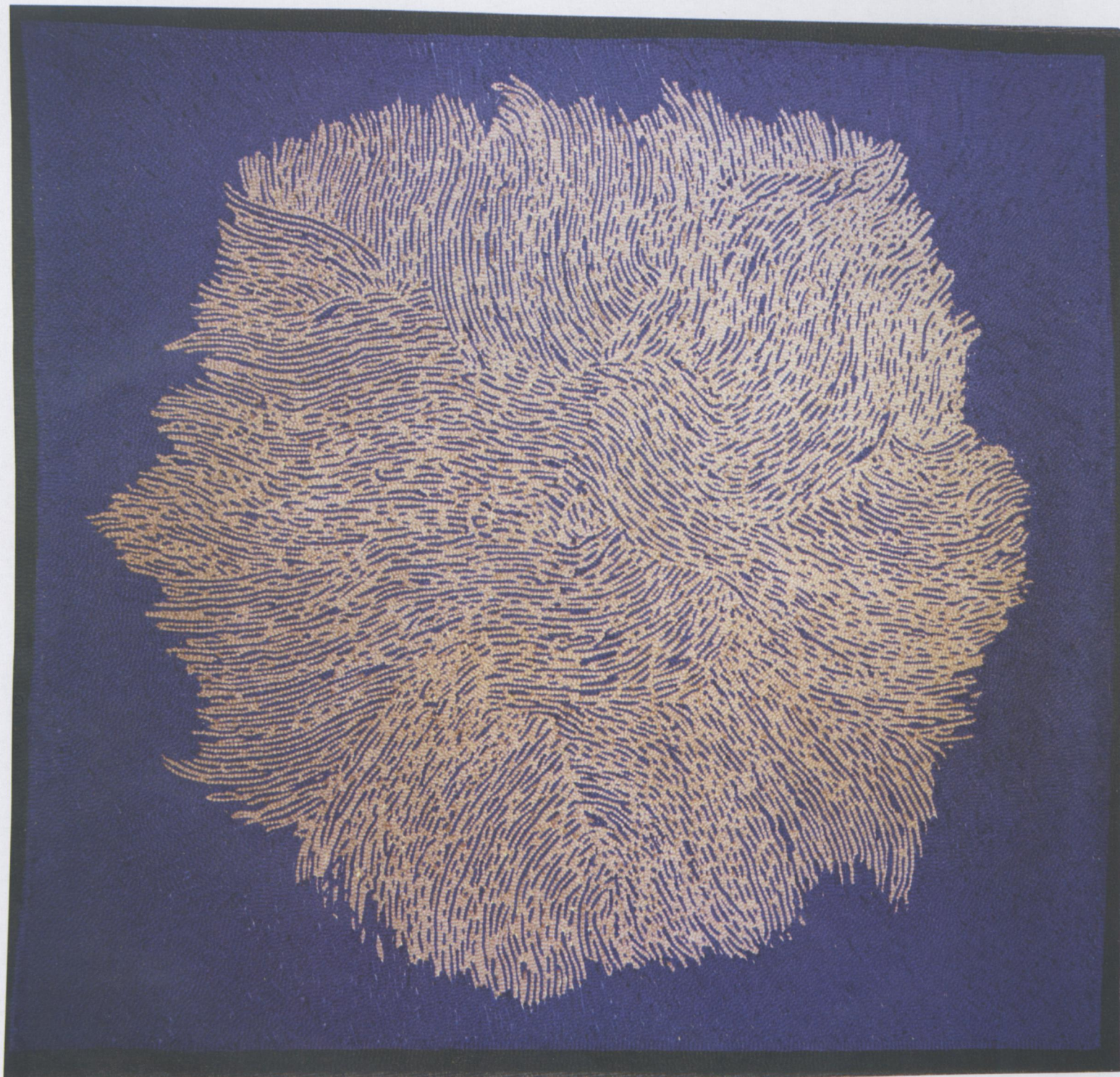
1 (Above) PATRICK SCOTT: *Blaze*, 1972. Woven wool tapestry on cotton warp. Aubusson Tapestry: Atelier Tabard Frères & Soeurs. 527 x 650 cm. (Bank of Ireland.)

2 (Right) PATRICK SCOTT: *Lansdowne*, c.1971. Aubusson Tapestry: Atelier Tabard Frères & Soeurs. 219 x 265 cm. (Private Collection.)



TAPESTRIES





Tapestry-making as practiced in Ireland differs considerably from that of France and Mexico and Scott has adapted his designs accordingly. The V'Soske Joyce technique is one of continuous looping on canvas: the loops are inserted with a tufting gun and are held in place with a latex backing. Varying loop lengths raise or lower areas of the design and the shearing process transforms the loops into pile or partial pile (if this is required), thus altering the texture and the appearance of the colours (which are initially determined by the dying process and expert mingling and twisting of the yarns). Scott has become adept at manipulating these variables and his designs for V'Soske Joyce have been successful because they are based on his thorough understanding of the process. The Aubusson technique is quite different as the tapestry is made on horizontal looms which weave woollen yarn under and over a cotton warp. It is a very high-quality product and is capable of much finer detail than tufting but is, however, much more costly to produce.

The Oaxacan weavers of Mexico operate a cottage industry version of Aubusson. They also produce a fine product, but one which is much looser and more rustic in character. Unlike both V'Soske Joyce and Tabard Frères et Soeurs, which both only use chemical dyes, the Oaxacans use mostly animal and vegetable dyes, particularly indigo and cochineal, which are locally produced. Scott worked with Benito Hernandez, a Zapotec Mexican, and his extended family in the weaving village of Teotitlan del Valle from 1981 to 1984 and some of the work was subsequently exhibited in the Museo del Arte Contemporaneo in the city of Oaxaca.

Patrick Scott's sustained focus on the circle is one of the most striking features of his sixty-year career; in fact, it has been suggested that he has done for the circle what Albers did for the square. It thus comes as no surprise to find that the earliest and most enduring design motif in the tapestries is the circle. It appears in many guises throughout Scott's work: initially we come across it as a megalith-like shape with concentric lines of tufting and later it is enlivened with alternating colours and raised bands. In one of the early Aubusson works, *Lissenfield* (1967), a megalith appears at the bottom of the composition.

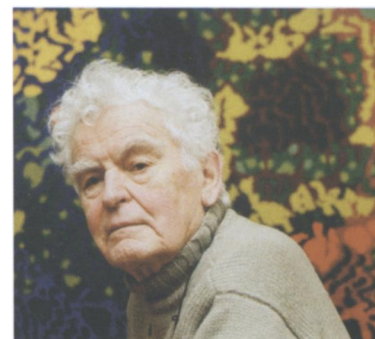
The circle also appears as a disc with a square hole in the middle as in *Sandycove* (1969) and *Galway* (1974). This strong image is based on the coins of ancient China and is related to the 'pi' disc, a Chinese symbol of heaven in which the circular hole represents the Sun, a subject to which Scott constantly refers in his work. The moon also frequently appears, as in *Mitsubishi* (1992), and *Harvest Moon* (1979) in the Department of Agriculture in Dublin. In *Harvest Moon*, the divided moon is set in a cloudy sky streaked with bands of harvest colours over a bog with tasseled inserts which are suggestive of bog cotton. The circle also appears in various forms in many of the Aubusson tapestries and is implied in the rainbow series of the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is variously represented as crisp and geometrical, organic and loose, and even slightly flattened or elliptical.

Another important element in the designs is the 'thumbprint' motif which was first used in *Lane* (Fig 3). This motif can be seen as a symbol of human identity and Scott uses it in several different ways. On occasion, elements of it are splashed across the

tapestry as can be seen in *Sandycove* and *Galway*. In other compositions, it is imprinted as though a huge fingertip had impressed its mark - this is particularly evident in *Tree Spectrum*, 1984 (Fig). In other tapestries, however, it is cut up and re-assembled as a collage to produce a seething mass of lines reminiscent of flickering flames as in *Lane* (Fig 3), *Nova* (1976), and, most startlingly, in *Blaze* (Fig 1), the great masterpiece in the Bank of Ireland headquarters in Baggot Street which depicts a fiery sun on a dark blue background. This vast tapestry, seventeen and a half feet by twenty-one, is a work of exceptional power and presence and it took ten weavers twelve months to produce it. The fact that it has been destroyed by damp and rot is unbelievable and profoundly shocking. One can only hope that the Bank of Ireland will hasten to repair the damage, or else have the tapestry re-made.

In most of the other Aubusson works, the thumbprint takes yet another form. A roughly circular web of lines is built up from the whorls and loops within which a variety of coloured abstract elements are represented. They range in character from the peaceful quietness of *Lissenfield* (1967) to the restless energy of *Lansdowne* (c.1971). Most of them use only three or four colours, the largest, *Eroica* (1977), uses nineteen. All of these works reward close inspection.

Rainbows inspire many of the designs of the later 1970s and early 1980s. The series of nine Rainbow Rugs was commissioned by the Kilkenny Design Workshops in 1979—although the designs had been worked on five years previously—and Scott works playfully with bands of colour: one minute directing them in straight lines and acute angles, the next reverting back to arcs and semi-circles. He placed the designs on blue, purple, red, and white backgrounds and they were made in editions ranging from one to thirty. In *Tree Spectrum* (1984), the rainbow has become more like a prism upon which a huge thumbprint has been impressed and this design is closely related to the tapestry made for the European Parliament Building in Strasbourg in 1981. A more recent rainbow is in the Vistakom Office in Limerick in which the colour slants down from the top on a white background. In the Mexican series the natural dyes are extra-ordinarily vivid and are a reminder of the strong colours of birds, flowers, and native costumes everywhere to be seen in that sunny land. Aside from the piece entitled *Rosc* (Fig 5), all of the Mexican tapestries are in rainbow colours, either laid out in horizontal lines to form pyramids (inspired by Mayan and Zapotec temples) or arranged in vivid verticals inspired by tropical nights, fireworks, and candle-lit vigils in local villages such as *San Felipe* (1982).



Scott's work can be seen as part of the tapestry renaissance brought about in France in the 1930s and 1940s by the artist, Jean Lurçat and the weaver, Francois Tabard.

3 PATRICK SCOTT: *Lane*, 1964/5. Tufted wool tapestry on cotton canvas. 140 x 132 cm. V'Soske Joyce. (Private Collection.)

After the rainbows, Scott returned to earth with a series inspired by the natural world. Flowers and plant forms became important, as exemplified by the waterlilies in the tapestry at the O'Reilly Building in Trinity College and the cherry blossom in the tapestry at Mitsubishi Electrical, a Hiberno-Japanese work in a building that also has a Japanese-style garden of raked sand in Dublin 24. Seaweed-like forms in bright and joyful colours have appeared frequently since 1994 and are apparent in the tapestries in UCD in both the O'Reilly Hall and the Daedalus Building. These seaweed forms remind us of Scott's great admiration for Matisse whose collages of coloured paper probably suggested to him the method of maquette-making he used for his tapestry designs.

Experiments with both form and medium in the early 1970s did not lead to any permanent change of direction, but it did see the creation of a blue and green curtain in the Central Bank in Dublin which was nicknamed the 'largest bead curtain in the world'. It is composed of three-inch lengths of plastic tubing and black beads strung on wire. Another one-off experiment was a diamond-shaped weaving which divides into strips from its midline. It was woven by Alice Roden in 1975 and entitled *Glenmacnass*. Leonora Fowler also made a weaving to one of Scott's designs for Carroll's Cigarette Factory in Dundalk in 1971. Scott's one experiment with painted tapestry was the vast 'village kite' which was made with the help of some friends in 1976 for the Kite Exhibition at the Kilkenny Arts Festival that year. The kite is

based on *Blaze* (Fig 1) and uses the same stencils. Perhaps the most satisfying of the experimental pieces is *Montrose* (1973) at the RTE Radio Centre, Donnybrook. This tapestry has an irregular outline and its linear pattern expands beyond the left-hand border like an extended telescope. Recently the artist embarked on a new path with *Millennium Madness in Hy Brassil*, 1999 in the offices of A & L Goodbody in Dublin's dockland. Who knows where this will lead: at eighty-one years of age, Scott's imagination remains as powerful as it was forty years ago.

Though they differ radically from the paintings in that they are mainly concerned with colour, Patrick Scott's tapestries are a vital and integral part of his life's work. He uses the large scale of the tapestry and the richness and vitality of the wool to give colour its maximum power which, combined with the strong and symbolic designs, strikes a deep chord within us. They really are best seen in the original as opposed to in reproduction and one hopes that someday they will all be assembled under the one roof in some marvellous exhibition. ■

Peter Lamb is a collector of 20th-century Irish decorative arts and is the author of articles on pottery for *Irish Arts Review*.

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4 PATRICK SCOTT:
Rainbow Rug,
c.1979. On royal
blue ground. 180 x
120 cm.
(Private Collection.)

5 Patrick SCOTT:
Rosc, 1982. Woven
wool tapestry on
cotton warp. Benito
Hernandez:
Oaxaca, Mexico.
(Private Collection.)



